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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000426

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: BORDER SECURITY: U.S. DELEGATION TAKES FIRST STEP  
WITH SARG

REF: DAMASCUS 00196

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a one-hour meeting between the U.S. and Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) delegations on June 12, both sides focused on border security and their respective efforts to stem the flow of foreign fighters crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border. Both sides concurred a secure and stable Iraq was in their mutual interests and essential for increased regional economic development and prosperity. The U.S. side proposed to assist Syria with enhancing border security and emphasized that working together in a regional, collaborative framework could produce long-term security and economic benefits for all countries involved. The specific mechanism would be a joint assessment (once Iraqi agreement was received) of several Syria-Iraq border crossing points to evaluate possible areas of cooperation. The SARG welcomed the U.S. interest in regional security, pointed out that it had long been involved in the fight against terrorism, had already improved its border security, and was currently working with the Government of Iraq (GOI) to intensify the level of security cooperation. The SARG side promised to convey the U.S. proposal for a joint assessment and potential cooperation to its political leadership for review. END SUMMARY.

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SARG BORDER SECURITY MEASURES  
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¶2. (C) After welcoming the U.S. delegation and expressing his desire for the meeting to be "fruitful and in the best interest of both parties," Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Arnous (DFM), the only person who spoke for the SARG side (composed of seven military officers and Arnous), reviewed Syria's current efforts to combat terrorism and control its borders. First and foremost, the DFM reported, the SARG had mobilized between six and seven thousand troops, including border guards, along Syria's 640 kilometer border with Iraq, in what he described as very difficult terrain conditions. He maintained these forces had been removed from other areas

where there was a greater need, and that their presence along the border demanded support from "a large portion of other forces." He also noted the financial burden such operations represented for Syria and listed key SARG actions at exerting greater control of its borders.

¶3. (C) Along various parts of the border, the DFM explained, the SARG had (1) erected and repaired three-meter high barriers; (2) maintained and repaired barbed-wire fencing, which was frequently cut by smugglers; (3) paved roads along the border; (4) increased the number of border security posts to 557, with a distance between each of one to three kilometers; (5) assigned between eight to 10 guards at each post in order to prevent "infiltration from Iraq;" (6) sent regular patrols along the border to apprehend infiltrators; and (7) instituted more rigorous airport checks and investigations of arrivals. The DFM argued Syria, despite lacking the proper technical equipment, was doing its best.

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STABILITY IN IRAQ  
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¶4. (C) "Syria is fundamentally concerned about stability in Iraq, in regional stability," the DFM affirmed. Alluding to on-going SARG-GOI security undertakings within the framework of a Joint Security Committee (ref A), he said the SARG had appointed liaison officers to cooperate with their Iraqi counterparts on border security. "Our information shows," he elaborated, "the cooperation is not optimal" because the Iraqis were sometimes slow to react to information shared by the Syrians.

¶5. (C) Overall Syrian-Iraqi relations, the DFM said, had improved greatly. FM Muallim's March visit to Baghdad had enhanced cooperation between the two countries and resulted in new agreements between their respective Ministries of the Interior.

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U.S. DELEGATION OFFERS STEPS TOWARD GREATER COOPERATION  
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¶6. (C) Major General Allardice, CENTCOM J5, thanked the DFM for his hospitality, acknowledged Syria's work in managing its borders, and described the U.S. delegation's mission as being part of a new direction in U.S.-Syria relations in keeping with the substance and tenor of President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech. Regional security and economic opportunity, he added, were also integral to the dialogue on establishing stronger border controls. "We see stability in Iraq as essential to economic opportunity in this region, and this is in both our interests."

¶7. (C) Maj Gen Allardice noted the U.S. wanted to enhance regional stability, but recognized any lasting achievements in this area necessitated working regionally at an operational level and addressing border issues. After explaining the functional and complimentary roles of CENTCOM and MNF-I, and how the U.S. shared with Syria a desire to repress violent extremist elements, Maj Gen Allardice stated the U.S. could potentially assist Syria on some of its "key vulnerabilities, especially those issues that would help stem the flow of extremists." He maintained extremists targeted Iraq from bases in Syria, and so destroying their operations represented a mutual U.S.-Syrian interest. "While a great deal has been accomplished," the Maj Gen confirmed, referring to the DFM's earlier comments on SARG border security achievements, "there is still much to do."

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COOPERATION ON FOREIGN FIGHTERS  
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¶8. (C) Stanching the flow of foreign fighters (FF) from Syria into Iraq was a difficult objective, Maj Gen Allardice admitted, but it could be achieved by (1) bolstering regional

security in a broader context; (2) enhancing internal stability in Iraq; (3) mitigating potential threats; and (4) preventing spillover of extremists from one area of operation to another. The Maj Gen explained there was consensus in

most Arab capitals on the importance of halting the flow of FFs. He emphasized collaboration in areas of mutual interest, including stability and security for Iraq and the region, presented one opportunity to foster broader USG-SARG security cooperation.

¶9. (C) Major General Allardice continued, "General Petraeus has received informal invitations from President al-Asad to visit . . . we hope that today's meeting will lay the foundation for such a meeting." A positive "foundation," the Maj Gen proposed to the SARG delegation, would be if this (the June 12) meeting could produce a tacit agreement on the need for a "joint technical assessment" of a small number of border crossings. The Maj Gen expressed his delegation's hope for a discussion of the proposal and that the two delegations could form a "working group" for continuing the dialogue into subsequent meetings.

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MNF-I EFFORTS IN IRAQ  
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¶10. (C) To put into context the U.S. position on future

border security cooperation, Major General Swan, Chief of Staff for MNF-I, provided the SARG side with a "progress report on Iraq." Overall, he said, security in Iraq had improved over the last year and violent actions by al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and other Sunni extremists had decreased, though there remained a concern about a recent "tactical surge" in attacks and a resurgence of militant Sunni nationalists. Still, the Maj Gen continued, "we are encouraged, especially regarding AQI." He argued leadership attrition and the disruption of extremists' financial networks continued to succeed. In the main regions of AQI operations -- Ninewah, Baghdad, and Diyala -- the number of attacks were down. "We've had similar success in south and central Iraq against Iranian-backed Shi'a groups; we see them as less capable of destabilizing the country," he said.

¶11. (C) The present concern, Maj Gen Swan continued, was that AQI would attempt to increase the FF flow into areas where MNF-I was succeeding. At present, the Maj Gen noted, the FF flow had decreased from 50-60 FFs a month to between six and ten. In the last ten weeks, however, there had been a spate of high profile attacks in Iraq and this greatly concerned General Odierno and Prime Minister Maliki. The Maj Gen expressed appreciation for the SARG delegation's report on their border-control measures and affirmed the USG's willingness to work with Iraqis and Syrians to stop the FF flow permanently. In terms of the U.S. partnership with Iraq, Maj Gen Swan described how the U.S. had (1) spent \$200 million on infrastructure and new roads along the border; (2) assisted Iraqi border forces in building an additional brigade along the western border, bringing the total number of brigades to 14; (3) assisted with technology improvements at border crossings; and (4) established a partnership between Iraqi border forces and the Department of Homeland Security.

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Towards Security Cooperation  
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¶12. (C) In response to Maj Gens Allardice's and Swan's overviews and proposals of working in tandem on areas of mutual interest, DFM Arnous stressed the SARG's disquiet over security in Syria, Iraq, and the region. "Any threat affects Syrian interests. For this reason we are doing our best" in combating such threats, he said, agreeing with Maj Gen Swan's point that the U.S. and SARG had overlapping interests on this topic. The DFM was quick to note, however, that the SARG could not "consider this meeting as the beginning of new

security cooperation." At the current stage, the Syrian delegation could only report the proceedings to its political leadership for review.

¶13. (C) In a general sense, the Syrians were already invested in security cooperation, Arnous continued. The SARG had joined a number of international agreements against terrorism and at the beginning of the war in Iraq it had provided the USG with important intelligence. "However," the DFM complained wryly, "the previous administration did not take note of that (sharing of intelligence) and took notice only of its own interests."

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"PEACE IS OUR FOCUS"  
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¶14. (C) "Peace is also our focus, which is why we look forward to future cooperation," the DFM said. He affirmed Syria's long-time opposition to al-Qaeda -- "you know we are opposed to it" -- and argued Syria had suffered greatly from terrorist attacks since the 1980s, often originating in safe havens created by other countries. This had been a long-standing concern, the DFM pointed out, noting President

Hafez al-Asad's proposal in the 1980s to convene an international conference on terrorism. Concerning infiltrators crossing Syria's border into Iraq, the DFM argued both countries had a responsibility to exert control. Syria, he said, had taken all the necessary steps on its side of the border and quoted Maj Gen Swan's figures on the decreased FF flow into Iraq as evidence of Syrian achievements. The DFM also concurred with Maj Gen Allardice's earlier statement that peace was conducive to prosperity, but reasoned regional security needed to be pursued in the framework of the Arab League. The DFM then reiterated the idea that future meetings between the two delegations would be submitted to the political leadership, as would General Petraeus's "willingness to come to Syria."

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LET'S LOOK FORWARD, NOT BACK  
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¶15. (C) Major General Allardice expressed his understanding that Syria and the U.S. were not "beginning" cooperation since it had been there, at some level, in the past, as the DFM had noted. With regard to the previous administration, though, the Maj Gen suggested the two sides look forward, not backward, for new opportunities presented by a new administration. He added it was in the spirit of President Obama's Cairo speech that the U.S. delegation had come to Damascus looking for a new relationship.

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BORDER ISSUES ARE COMPLEX  
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¶16. (C) The Maj Gen recognized Syria's attention to border security issues, adding that the complexity inherent in such operations necessitated great expertise and cooperation to ensure success. Returning to his earlier proposal to conduct trilateral assessments and evaluating them, the Maj Gen suggested the U.S. and Syria would be better positioned to stop the FF flow if there were exchanges in "understandings and situation assessments."

¶17. (C) Picking up on the DFM's argument that Syria had suffered from terrorism, Maj Gen Allardice stated al-Qaeda had inflicted more damage and pain on the Arab world than anywhere else. He asserted the elusiveness of violent extremists required pressure against the "whole network" simultaneously. Without coordinated action and the simultaneity of pressure, terrorists would simply move from one place to another. Progress on this front, the Maj Gen offered, would require the mutual efforts of many nations. Not just to stop groups like al-Qaeda, he said, but also to

understand how their networks operated.

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COOPERATION REQUIRES POLITICAL UMBRELLA  
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¶18. (C) The DFM remarked "mutual cooperation" was not one sided and, echoing a talking point that had come up in previous meetings between U.S. and SARG officials (ref A), stated such cooperation would require a political "umbrella" covering a range of other issues." Maj Gen Allardice then asked, "Do you believe we can reach an agreement on doing a border assessment?" The DFM, speaking in English for the first time since the meeting had begun, responded by asking the General whether he meant "bilaterally or trilaterally?" Maj Gen Allardice said the U.S. would certainly consult the Iraqis on the issue in the interest of existing relations, and observed the border was clearly a Syria-Iraq issue which should be addressed trilaterally.

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U.S. PRESSES IDEA OF ASSISTANCE ON FFs  
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¶19. (C) Major General Swan reminded the DFM of President Obama's announcement of a responsible draw-down of U.S. forces in Iraq. "It's important that as U.S. forces draw-down, al-Qaeda not be allowed to re-grow in Iraq -- AQI was not only a potential threat to the GOI, but also to Syria." He suggested the Iraqis might be willing to cooperate (and he was prepared to ask) on a border assessment project focused exclusively on a few crossing points, not the whole border. He offered MNF-I assistance in working with the SARG and GOI on determining specific points for examination, after which "we can report back to this group and take the next step to review (the border) more broadly."

¶20. (C) "We are doing our best to control the whole border," the DFM responded. Without directly addressing the proposed border assessment idea, he continued by saying, "We consider this meeting a place for all sides to express ideas." Maj Gen Allardice, seeking to clarify the Syrian position, asked if it were fair to say there was general agreement a next step was necessary, one that could include putting the idea of a "border assessment" into the framework of a joint border assessment project that ultimately report its findings back to "this body." The DFM demurred, saying he would report the proposal to the political leadership "if that's what you want."

¶21. (C) Major General Allardice moved the discussion back to a more general position of appreciation for some of the SARG's accomplishments in halting the FF flow from Syria to Iraq. For the draw-down of U.S. troops to be successful, he said, close cooperation would be key. The DFM replied, Syria and Iraq were already in cooperation, and their relationship would only intensify as the U.S. withdrew its forces.

¶22. (C) Brigadier General Legere, MNF-I CJ2, offered closer collaboration with the SARG on terrorist threat financing. In targeting the financial networks, she stated, we can attack terrorists on multiple fronts, "from transit, to facilitators, to fighters." She described financial networks as one of the substantive arenas in which the USG and GOI had begun working on together. The USG, she continued, had expanded the GOI's comprehension of how these networks operated. The Brig Gen suggested increased cooperation between Syrian and the U.S. would permit a discussion about how best to exchange information on terrorist threat financing.

¶23. (C) The DFM remarked somewhat obliquely that any talk of cooperation "would cover all these areas." He then pointedly remarked, "As I have stressed, we take all necessary measures to combat terrorism."

¶24. (C) Major General Allardice thanked the DFM for agreeing

to the meeting, noting the discussion had been very positive.

He hoped the topics discussed would serve as a springboard for further cooperation. The DFM concurred, adding the two countries would need to cooperate to achieve "development and prosperity," and further acceded to the need for more meetings, though without specifying on what they should focus.

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PARTICIPATION  
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¶25. (C) The U.S. delegation:

Major General Robert Allardice, Director CCJ5  
Major General Guy Swan, C3, Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I)  
Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly, Embassy Damascus  
Mr. Colin Hackett Kahl, DoD DASD for Middle East  
Brigadier General Mary Legere, C2, MNF-I,

Mr. Michael Corbin, Pol-Mil Counselor, Embassy Baghdad  
Ms. Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, Deputy Coordinator, S/CT  
Colonel Phillip N. Maxwell, Chief, CCJ5-SC  
Ms. Melissa Dalton, OSD-P, Syria Country Director

Anthony Deaton, notetaker  
Oumayma Bahloul, translator for U.S. side

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The SARG delegation:

Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Arnous  
General Jawdat Shaabo, Deputy Chief of the Operations Unit,  
Army  
General Ghassan al-Sheikh, Director of Planning Department,  
Army  
General Yahya Taher, Chief of Border Forces  
Brigadier General Sayez Saqr, Office of the Ministry of  
Defense (MoD)  
Brigadier General Amin Sharaby, MoD, Syrian Military  
Intelligence (SMI)  
Brigadier General Abdul Salaam Dagestani, MoD, SMI  
Colonel Munir Sulaydy, Chief of Combating Terrorism Unit, SMI

Two translators for SARG side, including Captain Mustafa.

¶26. (U) Maj Gen Allardice, Maj Gen Swan, Brig Gen Legere, and Col Maxwell did not have an opportunity to clear this report.  
CONNELLY